



USAID
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Two USAID/Bulgaria Legacies Mark Anniversaries

Two USAID-supported institutions in Bulgaria celebrated milestone anniversaries last week. The National Association of Bulgarian Municipalities, founded with USAID assistance in 1996 and now one of the most influential membership organizations in Bulgaria, recognized its 10th anniversary with a celebration in Varna. The Association represents 264 Bulgarian municipalities and is active in lobbying for legislative changes to support decentralization. High-level government officials and mayors from all Bulgarian municipalities attended the event; Ambassador Beyrle addressed the gathering.

The same week, the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) celebrated its 15th anniversary. AUBG is the largest non-governmental recipient of U.S. assistance in Bulgaria and the only American-style liberal arts institution. In August, AUBG was awarded the highest level of accreditation available for a Bulgarian university. Almost 1,600 students have graduated since the founding of the university, whose mission is to educate future leaders committed to serving the needs of the region by promoting the values of an open, democratic society. ❖

New Steps in Court Transparency in Dobrich

The Dobrich District and Regional Courts opened a new information center on October 12, one of the results of their active participation in the Courts in Partnership Program of the USAID Judicial Strengthening Initiative. The information center is one of several improvements the courts have made since the signing of a memorandum of understanding with USAID last year. New combined intake offices and a new regional training center were also recently completed, and a court website was launched.



Service with a smile as the new court information center in Dobrich opens to the public.

"The information desk is a new beginning for our work with the community. The citizens will have the chance to obtain information about trials within minutes, and there will be no need to go around the building. The center will have a room for lawyers, who will also have access to the computer system," said Encho Enchev, District Court Chairman. ❖

Three Courts Awarded Model Court Status

Three more Bulgarian courts achieved Model Court status in a ceremony on 30 September in Sofia. The District Courts of Kurdjali, Veliko Tarnovo, and Vratsa joined thirteen other USAID Model Courts whose work has focused on specific areas of judicial reform. Beginning in 2003, the three courts launched comprehensive court reform and modernization efforts to increase transparency, efficiency, and accountability. These efforts later focused on the Court Improvement Plan and its practical standards for judicial management, court administration, information technology, training, and public outreach.



Three new Model Court Chairpersons enjoy their USAID honors: District Court Judges Daniel Minov of Veliko Tarnovo, Tatyana Alexandrova of Vratsa, and Deyan Subev of Kurdjali (left to right).

Under the Judicial Strengthening Initiative (JSI), the three courts intensified their work to become Model Courts – reaching the required threshold of 75 percent success on the Court Improvement Plan standards. ❖



Chamber of Private Enforcement Agents Welcomes New Members

The Chamber of Private Enforcement Agents welcomed the second wave of 58 new members to its profession on October 14 with a swearing-in ceremony at Grand Hotel Sofia. USAID has been the main driver of this reform for the last three years. The law creating this new profession was passed in May 2005, and the first group of private enforcement agents was sworn in last spring. Since that time, more than 20,000 cases have been referred to private enforcement agents, and 2,000 cases have been solved. A backlog of approximately \$1.2 billion in uncollected judgments remained when the law was passed. USAID will continue assisting the Ministry of Justice and the Chamber of Private Enforcement Agents by introducing effective supervision mechanisms and training on professional practices and ethics. ❖

Peace Corps Volunteer Helps Shumen Launch New Council

Searching for ways to revive citizens' commitment to municipal matters, the Shumen municipality has created the first sister city council in Bulgaria. It will be a vehicle for communication between the city of Shumen and its new sister city of Scituate, Massachusetts. Peace Corps Volunteer Benjamin Lawrence worked actively for the establishment of the council, which is open to any citizen who seeks to contribute ideas, business or cultural ties to help build a more favorable international image of Shumen. Partnerships between Shumen and sister cities in Hungary, Russia and China will be strengthened following the partnership with Scituate.

Two weeks after the first official meeting of the council on September 11, Shumen received the Award for Most Innovative City of the week from the Foundation for Local Government Reform (FLGR). FLGR is a USAID implementing partner providing consulting and development services to Bulgarian municipalities. ❖

Lessons from Estonia in Local Economic Development for New EU Countries

From October 8-15, a group of local development experts from 8 Bulgarian municipalities traveled to Estonia for training on Improving the Economic Development Environment of Local Communities. Participants learned about the experience of a new EU member country in applying EU funds to strengthening local economic development.

"Quality implementation of reforms in Estonia is a good example for Bulgaria," said Diana Bebenova of Silistra. "Although this small country has only 20 years of independent political life before the changes in 1991, today it is the country with the most dynamic development index among the new EU members. Our Estonian hosts shared experience showing that politicians should possess a strong reforming spirit, listen to expert opinion, and decentralize the management of structural funds."



Estonian hosts shared tips for maximizing local development opportunities after EU accession.

Local Economic Development (LED) experts from Svilengrad, Plovdiv, Strazhitsa, Haskovo, Gorna Oryahovitsa, Silistra, Gotse Delchev and Yambol participated in the program, along with two representatives of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works. The training was administered by World Learning as part of the City Links Program of the Foundation for Local Government Reform (FLGR). ❖